

Newsletter

April 2016



Welcome

Welcome to the first edition of a newsletter that is to be produced monthly by Love Hambrook Marshes Charitable Incorporated Organisation (often shortened to Love Hambrook Marshes CIO or simply LHM). This is the charity that acquired the marshes when Kent Enterprise Trust (KET) sold the land two years ago.

As of the Friends' AGM in April, the Friends of Hambrook Marshes no longer exists, but we recognise the interest many Friends have in Hambrook Marshes and their continuing desire to keep abreast of news about conservation work and wildlife there, so the LHM trustees felt that the best way forward would be for them to assume responsibility for the newsletter. Consequently, you have probably received this newsletter because you were on the mailing list for the Friends of Hambrook Marshes, and were happy for your contact details to be passed over to LHM.

Inevitably, the Friends logo, created by children at Wincheap School, that headed each of the old newsletters, had to go, to be replaced by the new logo of LHM, which most of you won't have seen until now, although it appears on the new information boards that will be going up very shortly around the reserve. Over the months, the trustees will be developing the style and content of this newsletter, so it will gradually diverge from the format you were used to, but it will be better than before, containing far more news about recent work and projects that we hope to embark on, so you will be kept more fully informed.

In a world of ever-accelerating change it may or may not come as some consolation to know that I will still be writing each newsletter, so any irritating idiosyncrasies of style will remain.

If somebody has forwarded this newsletter to you, but you would like to receive future issues direct, please simply contact me at lovehambrook@gmail.com. You can also view our website at www.lhmcio.org. This is still under development, and will be added to and generally improved over the coming months. Finally, “The Friends of Hambrook Marshes” facebook page, managed by former Friend Dave Hanna, has been reincarnated as “Love Hambrook Marshes”, but remains in Dave’s capable hands.

Thank you to the Friends of Hambrook Marshes

We are most grateful to the Friends for their input to the management of the Marshes over the years. In particular, we wish to thank them for the £417 paid to Love Hambrook Marshes in early May, this being the balance taken out when the Friends’ bank account was closed recently.

What’s happening on the Marshes?

Return of the cattle

Young heifers began returning to the marshes in April, with 25 present near the end of the month, and just five more due to arrive. As the photos below show, initial reactions to the big wide world were rather mixed, and there was a great deal of skittish behaviour, but the animals quickly settled down and already seem perfectly contented. Some had to be coaxed out of the cattle trailer.....



.....but others couldn't wait to get out into the field after a winter cooped up in a barn.



More new fencing

Dilapidated fencing in the field immediately south west of the old embankment has recently been replaced by contractors, making it unlikely that any of the cattle will escape in future – a regular occurrence in the past. This is all the more important now that the last of the cattle grids are due to be removed this year. Fencing is an extremely costly business, but at least the new work should last a good few years.



Mowing

April saw the first mowing of vegetation on either side of the riverside path. This helps combat the problem of rank vegetation flopping onto the path in the summer months and reducing the usable width. The short grass is popular with feeding moorhens in winter (particularly the stretch between the two railway embankments) and, potentially, could be used by water voles, which like to graze on patches of short grass.

New scrub cutter

The recent purchase of a petrol scrub cutter with a reciprocating blade will enable us to trim back light scrub from the paths (mainly on the steps up to the viewing point on the old railway embankment), plus any awkward corners of tall grass or rushes that a tractor mower can't reach.

New path onto old railway embankment

In April Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership volunteers re-routed the path at the back end of the old embankment, doing away with a flight of steps that had been wrecked last year by the cattle. The far right photo shows the volunteers at work, while the near right picture is a view onto the embankment, across a repaired stile, with the old pathway blocked off by logs, and the new one to the right. Much of the work on the Marshes is carried out by KSCP volunteers. To find out more about this conservation organisation, or to become a volunteer, [click here](#).



Wildlife Report

I may still be buttoned up in a thick coat, hat and gloves on my early morning visits, but spring very definitely is on its way: no tufted ducks or teal have been seen this month and the last three snipe, another winter visitor, were recorded on 13th. As these birds moved away to their breeding areas,



their places were taken by a variety of summer migrants, and the songs of blackcap, reed warbler, whitethroat and cuckoo all managed to filter through the woolly hat that was firmly pulled down over my ears. As I'm sure you are all too aware, cuckoo numbers have declined alarmingly in recent years, and their song is now something to be remarked upon rather than a commonplace occurrence not meriting comment. I was therefore relieved to hear a very distant bird calling from the Chartham direction on 29th and, a few minutes later, to

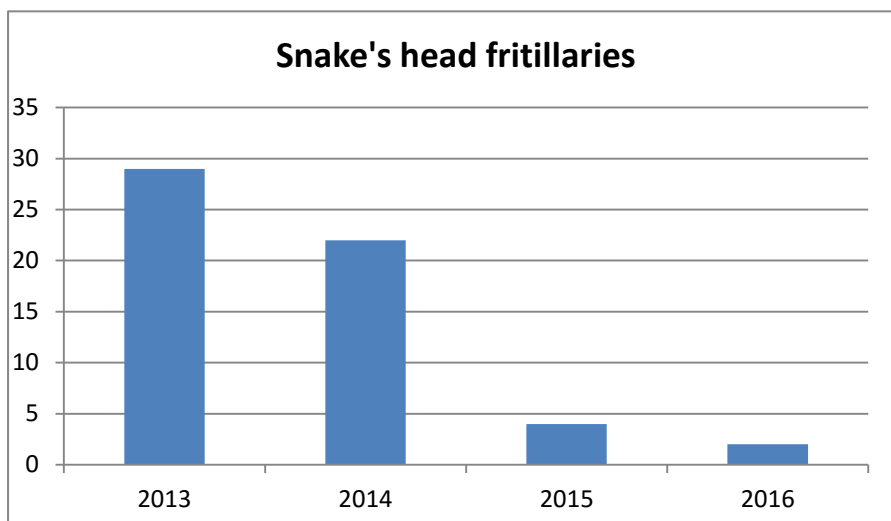
actually see one flying (above) over the marsh. In flight they are remarkably kestrel-like, with their long, pointed wings and long tail (though with distinctive rapid, but shallow, wingbeats), and when they are mobbed it is impossible to know if the small birds are reacting defensively against what they assume to be a bird of prey, or whether they are perhaps acting out a deeply rooted, atavistic attack on a bird that, at some subconscious level, they know to be a very real threat to their eggs and chicks. Other signs of spring were mallards shepherding their broods through a hostile world; some were at the heart-stoppingly delightful stage of vivacious fluff-balls, while others were half-grown, looking just like their sedate mothers. So, exit winter birds stage left, and enter spring migrants stage right; so far, so good, but what about the single meadow pipit that called on 29th, the first for two months? A few of these small, nondescript, streaky birds overwinter on the central field, but disappear in March, heading off to northern moors perhaps, or simply making the short passage to coastal grassland in Kent. For a bird to turn up here in late April was distinctly odd, but it was presumably just hurrying through the valley, desperate to reach its breeding grounds.

Last month I commented on the presence of a single coot on a ditch in Tonford Field. It is difficult to draw conclusions from isolated records like that, but it was still present a month later, to be joined on 29th by two others. I am now reasonably confident that at least one coot must be nesting there, which would constitute a new breeding record for the reserve.

Perhaps the only other bird record of note was a flock of at least 33 starlings (right) feeding in Tonford Field on 13th, having shunned the area all winter.



Disappointingly, the snake's head fritillary colony in the Boardwalk Field appears to be on the edge of extinction. Large numbers of bulbs were planted into hard ground one summer several years ago (wrong soil conditions, wrong time of year). Miraculously, a few hardy individuals did survive, but numbers have been dropping ever since I became involved in the reserve four springs ago, and this year I only managed to find two - one the traditional chequered pattern of two shades of purple, the other the less common pure white flower – see the bar chart and photos below. This formerly widespread flower was characteristic of wet meadows, that's to say fields which were mown in early summer for



a hay crop rather than to be grazed, except perhaps after the harvest. Allowing cattle to use that field on their arrival in early spring each year may well have sounded the death knell for these beautiful little flowers, which could have succumbed directly to being eaten or, more indirectly, to being trampled out of existence.



The last two Hambrook fritillaries?

Westgate Parks Project

Immediately downstream from Hambrook Marshes (on the Canterbury side of the Canterbury East railway bridge) is Whitehall Meadow, a field belonging to the City Council that is managed by a combination of grazing and mowing. Its main interest is in winter when part or all of it may be flooded, and it can then attract in hundreds of gulls, together with moorhens, mallard and a few other aquatic birds. Beyond Whitehall Meadow is Toddlers Cove, which marks the start of the Westgate Parks Project. A £770,000 Heritage Lottery Fund grant is enabling work to be carried out that will improve the whole area, starting with all the new play equipment in Toddlers Cove, plus fresh landscaping of the Westgate Gardens. Opposite Toddlers Cove, on the other side of the river, is Tannery Field, a slightly wilder area of grass, with a newly established meadow, plus groves of trees and shrubs. Finally, upstream from Tannery Field is Bingley Island, the least managed of the four elements of the Project; it has mown and long grass, an area of willow (now being managed on a micro-coppice rotation), a new pond and an older, overgrown pond that usually has breeding reed warbler and reed bunting.

We're delighted to have Westgate Parks, managed by Anna Bell, as near-neighbours, enabling the rural feel of Hambrook Marshes to extend right up to the Westgate Towers. If you would like to know more about the Project and the Friends of Westgate Parks, click [here](#).

Michael Walter
On behalf of the trustees of Love Hambrook Marshes CIO

Bird photos in this issue are courtesy of Dave Smith; all other photos are by trustees of Love Hambrook Marshes CIO.